

Out With the Old, In With the Old: The Longevity of Authoritarianism in Sisi's Egypt

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Thousands of fans turned up for the match. They pressed against the wire fence that enclosed the stadium, chanting and whistling for their team. The lucky few with tickets pushed their way to the front as armed rifle police formed tight lines at the back – forcing the crowd closer together. The stadium seated 30,000 and the crowd was at least that strong. There was no way in and thousands of voices raised in protest. Riot shields in front, a group of police pushed through an unlocked single gate less than four metres across. The fans surged, crushing those in front as wave after wave kept pushing forward. The scene quickly turned to chaos as the police fired tear gas in an attempt to stop them coming.

Twenty-two young men died. When their parents collected their bodies from the hospital, the surgeon-general gave them certificates to sign, verifying the cause of death as asphyxiation or internal injury from being trampled. Speaking to journalists and lawyers later, [many parents claimed the bodies had birdshot wounds](#), in the head and the back. Survivors testified that the police threw tear gas to confuse the crowd and then fired upon them with intention to kill. Some have even accused the police of a deliberate massacre, the wire fence a ploy to group fans together into an easy target.

The stampede occurred in early February, at the Air Defence Stadium in Egypt. Two months later, the names of the dead are held up by opponents of President's Sisi's regime as further confirmation that the Sisi regime is just as authoritarian as Hosni Mubarak was. Indeed, the alleged massacre is best seen as the tragic result of institutional continuity and a deeply ingrained tendency to conflate youth activism with existential threats to the Egyptian regime. A suspicion of youth activism is not unwarranted; Egyptian youth led the 2011 revolution and they remain the most persistent voices of dissent. However, the tendency to pathologise dissent encourages a

disproportionately violent response to a fairly limited threat and merely lays the groundwork for long-term youth discontent.



Fans vent their frustration at the Air Defence Stadium.

Institutions are the ‘rules of the game’ for existence in society. They can be objective – the structure of the military or a legal system for example; or subjective – the way ministers imagine their role within the government. Passed on through socialisation, and legitimised through discourse and ideology; institutions create enduring behavioural norms and frameworks of perception. Egypt has experienced a political revolution. Yet the core institutions of the country: judiciary, bureaucracy, and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, remain largely intact.

The hierarchy, operations and personnel of these bodies are also largely unchanged. More than this, the collective representations of these bodies, the stories and connotations they construct about themselves and society, also endure. Under Mubarak, social instability was pathologised as the harbinger of political and economic ruin. Considering institutional continuity, it is unsurprising that this tendency persists.

Sisi has acted to counter claims of a reincarnated security state. In a recent speech to the armed forces he emphasised the need to balance ‘[respect for human rights](#)’ against the security imperative. More concretely, Sisi quietly [removed Mohamed Ibrahim](#) from his post as Interior Minister following the Air Defence stampede and allegations that Ibrahim had [endorsed the use of machine guns](#) against unarmed protestors. Conversely, state discourse continues to link all opposition – be it from football fans or student protestors – to the threat of extreme Islamist violence. While this is a real and growing threat, it is not necessarily the work of the Muslim Brotherhood as the regime claims.

Sisi would be well served by forsaking the pathologising tendencies of old. Realistically, there is little political opposition that could threaten his rule and the fight against domestic terrorism is not enhanced by firing on football fans or pushing private security into universities. Students Against the Coup is the most active protest group today, and although originally aligned with the Brotherhood, its leaders now mostly oppose any form of Islamic rule. Its numbers on the street are also dwindling with each passing day, discouraged by draconian legal sentences and arbitrary violence. This should not be seen as a victory for repression. Rather, Sisi has been strategic in prioritising action on matters of broad material concern to the Egyptian population, particularly energy supplies, unemployment, and economic growth. For now, there is little due cause for continued, widespread unrest.

There is however no guarantee it will stay that way. Sisi faces significant economic challenges and heightened popular expectations. Although he is unlikely to introduce Western-style democracy and for some this will be an on-going grievance, there is still room to legitimise a greater level of unrest and critique. Doing so not only removes due cause for protest today but may act as a safety-valve for future discontent. Sisi has seen the endurance of popular unrest in the face of more repression than he might be willing to risk, and pitting his regime against both political freedom and his country’s youth is not a viable long-term strategy.